Working title:

**How to cook collectivity**

***Ingredients of collectivity***

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1. Last year I traveled almost every week from Brussels to Rotterdam to learn about an organization that wishes to become a collective. They asked me to guide them in this process, provide them with advice and support where problems arise. The organization has existed for almost thirty years, and originated in Rotterdam's *underground* *scene*, from a barbershop that rather wanted to be a concert venue. The original nature of the organization is that of a group of people who wanted to organize a different kind of togetherness, and saw hairdressing and listening to live music as a business model that did not yet exist. Later, in addition to musicians, visual artists became involved through one-year residencies, and a small restaurant was established to function as an additional source of income. It became a success, leaving the collective spirit somewhat lost over the years due to growth, professionalization and institutionalization, which happens with so many small initiatives. So I was puzzled by the question posed: Can we reverse this movement, and recover something of our commonality? Can we learn to work as a collective? What would it take to do that? It sounds utopian, and the fact that the organization is called Roodkapje (“Little Red Riding Hood”) underscores the somewhat fairy-tale nature of their request.
2. Nevertheless, my imagination was sparked, and during my first meetings at Roodkapje, I was struck by how informal and decisive the organization is. The mentality of the staff is reminiscent of that of a catering team tasked with running a restaurant. Everyone has both feet on the ground and is direct and well attuned to each other. There is quick action, half a word is often enough. Soon I notice that the hurriedness of the conversations is also reflected in the hurriedness of the ongoing business. Roodkapje is a place of improvisation, all sorts of things are happening in the same space on the same day, each time with different people involved. The scenography of the space is constantly being built up and broken down. Every few hours it's time for the next “*change of scenes*,” where the set and extras change completely.
3. Along the way, I have several formal and informal conversations with artists involved, with the personnel and with the director. The self-proclaimed wolf in the Little Red Riding Hood story. I moderate those moments, using *tools* (especially to induce a slowdown, such as writing instead of speaking, drawing together, certain conversation structures) to pull people somewhat out of their habitual roles, trying to fiddle a bit with the structure of the organization in order to create space to question taken-for-granted assumptions. Together with Simon Kentgens, I also organize a public program (So Happy Together) in which external collectives are brought in to share their knowledge, and create encounters between the organization and the public.
4. It proves difficult to truly change anything. It is chaotic to coordinate talks, the staff and resident artists do not have enough time to actually turn into actions the things they say during the talks, it proves difficult to involve the personnel in the public program. The external collectives we invited only share their work with an external audience, disconnected from the organization’s staff. At the same time, internal tensions arise between the resident artists and Roodkapje staff members. The former experience their residencies as far too heavily scheduled, with too little time off[[1]](#footnote-2) in which to produce their individual work. The staff in turn find themselves with the hot breath of funding bodies breathing down their necks, thinking: we promised to explore collectivity, but also to achieve a certain audience reach, and now we must deliver. In taking a closer look at these frustrations, I notice that both parties are actually caught in the same rushed logic of constantly producing, leaving no time to actually allow some form of collectivity.
5. In my research on *artist-run* organizations and other collaborations, I found that some groups call themselves a collective, but don’t actually function as such. For example, they are more of a support structure that facilitates individual art practices or a shared workspace. Similarly, art organizations that do not call themselves a collective at all have moments of great openness and collaboration that are very close to a collective grasp of that organization. I am beginning to realize that the notion of *collectivity* in one´s research is not necessarily consistent with how it is used by different groups, and that within my own framework it is more workable as a practice than as a fixed identity. Collectivity is something we *do*, not necessarily something we *are*. And as a consequence: we are a collective when we act as a collective. The question then becomes rather process-oriented: can we practice collectivity, and if so, what do we need to do so?

This way of dealing with collectivity strongly leans toward what performance theory describes as *embodiment*.[[2]](#footnote-3) By practicing collectivity, we get a sense of the meaning of a concept, and it moves from a theoretical discourse into our bodies, as it were. It becomes part of our actions, part of our daily routine. Theories around *embodiment* problematize the distinction between body and thinking: our thoughts and language shape how we feel, our culture determines how we express it, so there is a constant interchange between abstract concepts and bodily experiences.

Further along this line of thought, the question then becomes: how can we embody collectivity? How can we act collectively, feel as a collective, experience a collective moment? What are the requirements for this?

1. **What Time?**

Back to Roodkapje. During one of the conversations with the organization, the question comes up: What does collective time mean in contrast to Roodkapje’s institutional time? Institutional time is monetized time, someone says. It is productivity, there are people on the payroll, and work is done in the context of deadlines and projects. Haste is normal. Doing things more slowly is seen as laziness. In its early days, noone at Roodkapje was paid, which often blurred the distinction between having fun and working. A parallel is drawn with collectives: in those collectives, there is also communal unpaid time, which is actually necessary for the collective to function. But this should not be confused with how companies use “play time” to help their employees perform better. It should literally be free time, time not used to recover from work or to do other (unpaid) work such as maintenance tasks. There is also a comment about *fair pay, fair practice*, isn’t that something that gets in the way of this “hanging time”? How can we consider fair pay while ensuring that a group also checks in with each other outside of this paid time? The real plans are often made when everyone goes to a bar, says someone, or at the coffee machine, during break time, says someone else.

Collective time, on the contrary, is characterized by a degree of unpredictability, being in the moment, not having a preconceived plan or deliberately deviating from the plan. Whereas institutional time is created within the institutional framework, collective time is where this framework is called into question and reflected upon together. When you ask existing collectives when they feel most like a collective, they mention moments of thinking and acting together and coming up with unique ideas: the group is more than the sum of its individual members, a collective voice emerges. It reminds you of Helio Oiticica’s idea of *creleisure*. *Creleisure* is brought up by him and Lygia Clark[[3]](#footnote-4) in 1969 (unpublished text: *The Senses Pointing Towards A New Transformation*) as an attempt to bring art and everyday life closer together:

“*Creleisure is the non-repressive leisure, opposed to diverted oppressive leisure thinking: a new unconditioned way to battle oppressive systematic ways of life. Its practice, open-practice, is a way of taking hold of a process, a sympathetic creative process, where sense-apprehension is body-apprehension which generates behavior-action, in a total organic process.”*

What I find so compelling about this term is that it is about a way of spending time that is not productive, but also differs from leisure time (leisure-time) as it is framed in the Western world. It is (as Oiticica also explains later in his text) an intrinsically revolutionary term, a new way of spending time that is certainly creative but also problematizes the art object as an expression of this creativity.[[4]](#footnote-5)

In this, the work of art is something along the lines of:

“*an internal-growing proposing experience: proposing to propose.”*

And in doing so, spending time is something along the lines of:

“*from person to person, a corpora; improvised dialogue which can spread out into a whole chain creating a kind of biological ensemble or what I would call a crepractice. (...) establish a really growing communication on an open level. (...) No corrupted, interested ‘profit’ should be expected—the remarks of ‘it’s nothing’ or ‘what’s the point,’ etc., will pour out; (...) ”*

It is, in other words, a proposal for a different behavior, of a different way of being together, a different way of spending time, not production, not consumption, but time to be creative, to be in the moment, away from a project logic.

1. ***What Space?***

If we can think about (the prerequisites of) collective time, can we also look at collective space? What spaces lend themselves to the creation of collective moments, and what requirements must such a space meet?

Thinking back to the public moments of So Happy Together, the layout of the space played an important role. Each time the invited collectives were asked how they wanted to design the space. In the preparations of the space these collectives got to know each other. Because of the concrete request to do something together, we deliberately chose not to spend too much time talking about what we would do then. Several things turned out to be important for creating a collective space: for example, introducing furniture that could also be something else. Wooden blocks that can function as benches, but stacked on top of each other turn into a table, and upright serve as standing tables. Carpets to sit, stand and lie on, with the visitors deciding how to relate. Nothing should be too determinant of the arrangement of bodies in the space, so a conference table with chairs around it was out of the question.[[5]](#footnote-6)

The *Nautonomat Operation Manual* by Raqs Media Collective is a text that keeps returning as an opening to think about a group’s use of space, and what *hosting* means. In this text, they describe what is needed in a space to facilitate a collective conversation:

“*A nautonomat is a craft of autonomy. It is a vehicle, a scenario, a loose, changing, evolving protocol of doing things together and sharing time, ideas and testing a few visions whenever necessary. (...) The nautonomat piloted by nautonomonauts is itinerant and can 'pop up' in different spaces,[[6]](#footnote-7) and occupy different lengths of time in concordance with the increasingly mobile working lives of people in the arts, and their friends. (…)”*

They also clearly state what the Nautonomat should not be:

“*[...] the spatial echoes of a boardroom, a hotel or airport lounge, an office, a classroom or a doctor's waiting room. These are spaces that kill thought before it can even germinate. Remember, also, that the nautonomat is neither a studio nor a gallery. If anything, it is more like an orbiting clubhouse or a common room, a space for conversation, repose, experiment, disagreement, observation, reflection, play, sleep and joy.”*

Again, this text praises objects that do not yet have a specific form, such as tools (paper, pens, string, clay) and natural objects (wood, stones, wool [*things to hold, weigh and consider*]), and it discourages working with recognizable figures or icons, such as images of celebrities, stuffed animals, matryoshkas or other dolls.

In relation to the space for collectivity, the Nautonomat is primarily a space to encourage a shared imagination, also called by them “*the rediscovery of conversation and collective learning as an art form”*. Objects with an overly defined form obstruct this imagination.

1. **Connecting The Dots**

Beyond the conditions that a necessary for shared time and space, I noticed during this year at Roodkapje that two other ingredients are needed to make collectivity possible. The first ingredient is a common goal, a common project on which to work. Although that project can also be an intrinsic purposelessness, or the only goal can be endurance: simply *staying in existence*. Also, collectives often arise out of a shared need: not having the right papers and assisting each other in that, not having access to good workspaces and opening a shared workspace, a common social purpose, etc.

Someone from the collectives I work with compared it to a ball. You need a ball as a group, that’s the game, kicking that ball, getting it somewhere. If you take that ball out of them game, things quickly become personal and the group loses focus, and eventually falls apart. A ball is something that is shared: This can be an art form, an artistic practice, but also a common enemy or a common love. Who or what is Roodkapje’s ball? Is it the common projects? Is that the work being produced? Or is Roodkapje’s ball rather to keep playing, to keep going? How can that ball be more at the center of attention? You’ll notice that this particular ingredient is related to the productivity mentioned before. Perhaps Roodkapje has too much ball, and it is necessary to focus a little less on the common projects, but more on the common structure?

That brings us to the last crucial collective energy ingredient, which seems to connect all the conditions mentioned so far. Just as a new time must be invented, and the objects in space need to be both one thing and another, in order to allow for collectivity, there must be some form of transgression. Literally the possibility of questioning, transgressing and redefining prior (named or unnamed) boundaries. This also relates to another concept floating around Roodkapje: *Porosity*. Projects, moments and interpersonal relationships are porous in a collective moment, in the sense that there is room for others to enter and change form through them; that there is room for growth, deepening and influencing.

In the context of collectivity, transgression and porosity are connected with each other, because transgression is about the right to decide on one’s own preconditions, in other words, to co-decide on the rules of the game. Porosity is needed to allow this transgression. If everything is rigidly defined, there is no room for transgression, and collectivity will disappear as well.

But this is also where the aforementioned *Tyranny of Structurelessness* resurfaces. A structure must be present in a group for it to be questioned and changed. There is no “unstructured group,” only groups with more or less *spelled-out* *structure*. The more implicit the structure is in a group, the greater the risk of hidden power, called elite formation by Freeman. And that also makes collectivity inherently political; it is about power, decision-making, responsibility and agency.

1. These ingredients are, of course, neither complete nor unambiguous. As with any recipe, there is room for improvisation and adjusting the portions to one's own taste. It is up to the group itself to decide how collectivity is ultimately cooked, my only advice would be not to let the pot simmer on the stove for too long.

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1. It is suggested from the residents to allow more unstructured time in their residency track. But one wonders if that is what is needed within Roodkapje. One is reminded of Jo Freeman’s text *The Tyranny of Structurelessness*, in which she writes about groups where there is supposedly no structure, but where there does appear to be an implicit structure, just not named. We’ll come back to this later. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
2. Embodiment is a cross-disciplinary concept used in the arts by makers engaged in somatic practices, as well as by anthropologists, psychologists, philosophers and activists (Gabor Maté, Bessel van der Kolk, Rae Jonson, among others). Embodiment studies the subjective aspect of the body. The body is viewed not as an object, but as a “who we are.” In this theory, body and mind are closely linked. Some authors go quite far in this, such as Amanda Blake. She says “Your body is your brain.” The body affects emotions, cognition, behavior, personality and regulation. In the arts, the term is used in dance and theater (e.g. Ruth Zaporah’s Action Theater), but also visual arts (whether or not linked to education and forms of therapy, e.g. Lygia Clark). A note to make here is that this is a term rooted in Western Enlightenment thinking, as the body and the “mind” (in Cartesian thinking) were separated, it became necessary to throw up a term to describe the relationship between the two and link them back together (for this, see The Mindful Body: A Prolegomenon to Future Work in Medical Anthropology by Nancy Scheper-Hughes and Margaret M. Lock). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
3. Lygia Clark is interesting to further explore because from her art practice she focuses on the sensory experience rather than the object, the object is always relational to the viewer (participant). She also attributes this to a form of *embodiment*: *“Besides the fact that Clark created fascinating objects (...) [They] do not get their full sense on their own but instead depend on the participant's embodiments, because they intend to access a bodily memory through pre-verbal and non-verbal experience.”* [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
4. Of course, this form of spending time can also only occur if basic needs are met, and everyone is sufficiently rested, fed and cared for, feeling safe, which is not self-evident. This has to do with an increased attention to precarity, both of the participants in this time occupation and of the organization as a whole. Stress is a creeping indicator of precarity. We become accustomed to uncertainty and constant alertness, which seems to greatly hamper the idea of *creleisure*. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
5. While that table with chairs around it seems to be the tacit trademark of the institutional space, preferably with a whiteboard or projection screen next to it. How do we get rid of that table? [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
6. Although you do not entirely agree with the focus on the “pop up,” especially since you learn from collectives how important it is to have a settled space, as a firm value to relate to as a group. Of course, the Nautonomat can still be of a temporary nature within this, but again you wonder if that is the right way to engage with that space. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)